

TRUE GRATITUDE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

In this week's Parsha there are three plagues that were performed by Aharon rather than Moshe: Blood, Frogs, and Lice. Rashi explains that for Moshe to facilitate those plagues would have been a lack of gratitude and appreciation. The plagues of Blood and Frogs afflicted the waters of the Nile, which had saved Moshe when he was set afloat in the basket. The plague of Lice afflicted the sand and dirt of Egypt, which Moshe used to hide the body of the Egyptian overseer. Because Moshe personally benefited from the Nile and the sand it was wrong for him to perform those plagues.

Let's be honest. The Nile River and the sands of Egypt are objects. There is no basis to suggest that they have any kind of intelligence or feelings that should concern us or demand sensitivity on our part. Why does G-d insist that Aharon present the miracles of Blood, Frogs, and Lice rather than Moshe? For that matter, Pharaoh was partially responsible for raising Moshe in his own home for 20 years. Where do we see Moshe expressing appreciation and gratitude to Pharaoh for all the benefit he had received from him?

The Torah defines Moshe Rabbeinu's character. In Bamidbar 2:3 the Torah refers to Moshe as "exceedingly humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth." The Rambam in Hilchos Dayos - The Laws of Character Traits, 1:5 explains that all character traits exist on a continuum between two extremes. Depending on the individual and his personal circumstances, character can express itself in varying degrees along the continuum. It is incumbent upon the individual to develop his character so that he can willfully control its expression as required by the situation. This controlled expression is called the "middle path" or the mid-point along the continuum.

The Rambam explains that all aspects of our character are within our control. Character traits should be viewed as tools that were given to us in order to live our lives as effectively and productively as possible. Depending on the situation, different expressions of a character trait will be more effective than others. As an example, the Rambam presents the Arrogance - Meekness continuum. There are times when the most effective way to deal with a situation is for a person to be meek, "lowly" and deferential. There are other times when a person should be more arrogant and assertive. The Rambam plotted the extremes and determined that the mid-point between arrogance and meekness is humility.

Arrogance-----Humility-----Meekness

This suggests that humility is an attitude that allows a person to express himself in a manner that is

determined by judgment rather than emotion.

In the case of Moshe, it was proper for Moshe to be meek and deferential in relation to G-d. However, in relation to Pharaoh he had to be far more assertive and demanding. Moshe as an individual removed from circumstances was humble. He was confident in his abilities, secure in his self- image, and respectful of all others. He did not view himself as better than anyone else, even if his lot in life was to lead and facilitate miracles. He was given abilities to be used for the betterment of the Jewish people and in the service of G-d. He argued with G-d by the Burning Bush because he felt that his brother was far better suited for the job. However, once Moshe accepted the position as the Redeemer, he fearlessly confronted Pharaoh with confidence and determination.

Moshe's confidence was not a product of his own self- image. It was a reflection of his trust in G-d and the divinity of his mission. His talents and abilities had been given to him for the purpose of accomplishing G-d's requests. As the servant of G-d there was no cause for Moshe to demean Pharaoh or speak against him. At no time do we see Moshe venting any personal emotions. Moshe's only agenda was to serve G-d and deliver His message.

The character profile of Moshe is exactly as the Rambam plotted the Arrogance - Meekness continuum. In general, Moshe was accepting and respectful of all people without feeling superior to them in any way. He was exceedingly humble and recognized his talents and position as being tools with which to serve G-d. If his mission demanded a more aggressive stance, such as to protect the Jews, Moshe became fearless and strong. If the situation demanded deference and humility, such as in relation to his brother or father-in-law, Moshe became humble and obsequious.

Humility is not simply a feeling or the way a person happens to be. The basis of humility is an active belief and trust in G-d, and it must be willfully developed. If a person believes that G-d truly created and maintains the universe, he must also believe that everything was created for a reason. Therefore, we must respect everything and every person as being intrinsic to G-d's purposes. Everything is therefore deserving of our appreciation and gratitude. Whether animate or inanimate, whether we are the direct or the indirect beneficiaries, we must recognize the holistic and interdependent nature of our universe and acknowledge our personal benefit in word and in deed.

It makes sense to say that, the more humble a person the greater his recognition of the Creator and his acknowledgement of the benefit he derives from the world around him. Therefore, Moshe had to show his appreciation and gratitude to the Nile River and the dirt of Egypt, not for the benefit of the water or the dirt, but as an acknowledgement of G-d's absolute control over all things.

When it came time for the first plague, G-d sent Moshe to greet Pharaoh "in the morning as he went out the water." Rashi references the Medresh that explains how Pharaoh attempted to declare himself a deity by virtue of his never having to go to the bathroom. In fact, he would wake up early and secretly go to the Nile River and take care of his needs.

In Bereishis 47:10, the Torah told us that Yakov blessed Pharaoh. Rashi referenced the Medresh

Tanchumah that recorded what that blessing was. The Medresh says that Yakov blessed Pharaoh that the Nile River would rise at Pharaoh's command. Considering that Egyptian agriculture and economy depended upon the Nile River overflowing its banks and irrigating the fields, Yakov's blessing had profound and far-reaching benefits for Egypt. Additionally, it placed Pharaoh as the key figure responsible for the ongoing prosperity of his country.

G-d's intent in sending Moshe to speak to Pharaoh on the banks of the Nile River was two-fold. 1. Let Pharaoh know that Moshe knew that he wasn't a deity. 2. Give Pharaoh the chance of acknowledging his appreciation and gratitude to G-d and the Jews for all the benefit he had personally enjoyed by willfully granting the Jews their freedom.

Whenever the Torah presents us with an opposing figure or enemy, we must remember that G-d only chooses worthy adversaries for the Jews. The Nimrods and Pharaohs of the world were selected because they could otherwise have been partners with us in bringing the world closer to serving G-d. Instead, "they harden their hearts" and chose to oppose and oppress, rather than serve and benefit.

If Moshe was the most humble of all men, then Pharaoh had to have been the most arrogant of all men. If Moshe, as the most humble of all men, recognized his absolute dependency upon G-d and acknowledged his appreciation and gratitude for everything that G-d had provided for him; then Pharaoh, as the most arrogant of all men denied having anything to do with G-d. "Who is G-d that I should listen to His voice and send out the Children of Israel," (5:2) denied any appreciation to G-d for all the benefits he and his nation had enjoyed.

True appreciation and gratitude must be related to G-dly service. If the meaning behind gratitude is acknowledging the primacy of G-d and His intentions and recognizing how we are the beneficiaries of His providence, then it makes sense that we should only express appreciation to those things and individuals who willfully serve G-d through their actions. If someone willfully disregards G-d and does everything in his power to thwart G-d's plans, and yet G-d mercifully and lovingly makes it all come out to our benefit, that person is not deserving of our appreciation and gratitude.

Pharaoh was a worthy adversary to Moshe. He could have joined Moshe in serving the Jews and preparing them to receive the Torah and inherit Eretz Yisroel. Instead, he willfully chose to ignore G-d's primacy in his own life and the lives of his people and attempted to subjugate the Jews to his will rather than the will of G-d. As such, even the early years he invested in Moshe's upbringing were not deserving of appreciation and gratitude.

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The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA.

